



Tips for Teaching Outdoors

I. Planning the Field Experience

Choosing a site

In picking a site here are some things to consider:

- Are the necessary facilities there (washrooms, picnic tables, shelter, water)?
- Are there any hazards that you need to be aware of?
- Is the site easily accessible to buses? Will the bus have enough space to turn around? Is there a safe place for the bus to load and unload?
- It is best to visit a site prior to bringing students to it.

Supervision

Having additional supervisors will help to ensure a successful field experience. When available, it is ideal to have one adult supervisor for every group of students.

II. Before You Go

Discuss appropriate student behavior, and review expectations at the field site at the start of the day. Here are some rules that we suggest reviewing with your students:

I will never be by myself

Traveling with a partner is always safest. We usually ask students why we should follow this rule, and review the following reasons with the group: (1) in case we get lost, (2) in case we get hurt, and (3) in case we encounter large mammals (e.g., bears). In addition, we ask students who need to "pee in the woods" to take a partner with them.

Look, Learn, Leave Alone

All living things are to be respected and not harmed in any way, including plants and bugs. We ask that NO COLLECTION of animal, mineral or vegetable material be made for the following reasons:

- to demonstrate respect for living and non-living things.
- to demonstrate that organisms are best studied in their natural habitat without observer interference.
- to ensure that the forest ecosystem stays as intact as possible.

Reduce site impact

Make it the responsibility of your class to ensure that the site is in as good or better condition when you leave, as it was when you arrived. This includes the trails, lunch area, toilets, etc.

Be prepared

Students MUST bring enough clothing, food and water to be outside all day. Other important items include bug spray and sunscreen. If students will be carrying their backpacks for the day they should leave unnecessary items (binders, textbooks...) at the school. You may wish to leave behind students who are ill prepared on the day of the trip.



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III. Group Management Suggestions

- a) Establish a group silence and/or 'gather up, activity's over' signal. You may wish to adjust your normal classroom signal with howling like a wolf (try getting the students to howl along with you — it's great fun!).
- b) Decide on your activity groups before visiting the site. Students should ensure all members of their group are present. You may also wish to adopt a buddy system. The buddy should be someone with whom the students are NOT LIKELY to wander off.
- c) Set boundaries - When walking on a path, students should not pass the group leader [teacher], nor should they fall too far behind. If you have more than one teacher or parent volunteers it is best to have one of them at the back of the group. The idea is that the leader will "pull" the group, while the adult at the back will "push" slower students along. If you are working at a specific site, also set up boundaries for how far students are able to roam. Students should always be within visual range.

IV. Tips for a Meaningful Field Experience

Explore Together

- Be an explorer along with the students. You don't have to have all the answers or know all the names of plants and animals to teach outdoors. It's difficult for any person to know everything about the forest. It is all right to say to a student that you do not know the answer. Use reference books to help find the answers together. Students will learn to model your research skills and recognize that reference books are important for this purpose.
- To be successful, a teacher needs a general understanding of how the forest exists as a community and some confidence in leading activities in the outdoors.
- Ask questions to encourage students to think about the questions they ask of you. For example, in response to a student's question, "What made the tracks?" ask the student a rhetorical question, "I wonder what direction it's going in?" Ask questions that are open-ended, rather than alternative response (yes/no), to help students answer their own questions.

Use Your Senses

- It makes sense to use your senses when outdoors. Sensory activities deepen the experience and awaken the mind. Use sight, smell, touch and hearing.
- Do not, however, encourage students to taste anything even if you are or the student is absolutely sure that the item is safe for consumption. Leave the berries and mushrooms for the forest dwellers.

Take Advantage of Teachable Moments

- Since you have adopted the explorer mentality and methodology, the flow of your program should be relaxed and not too rigid. Enjoy the spontaneous things that happen, for example, the appearance of wildlife. Take the time to observe. If you do, students will easily return back to the interrupted activity.
- Flexibility is the key to a successful outing and is certainly less stressful. Go with the flow but have a planned program.